

THE SUPERNATURAL IN FRENCH LITERATURE

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THE supernatural has been present in all stages of literary evolution. Whether or not we consider it essential to the epic or any other literary form, its vitality and validity in fiction as well as in poetry cannot be called into question. The permanence and persistence of the supernatural in all ages and in all languages is sufficient proof of its potency and power in arts and letters.

The supernatural fills an essential need of man. It has its origin in a universal instinct which prompts man to take an interest in things beyond his narrow vision. Moreover, the supernatural is the traditional escape of men from a miserable reality. So in the Middle Ages, so in all ages, people have taken mental flight from surroundings not to their liking.

The supernatural formed a very important part in the literature of the Middle Ages. It was the subject which received the most elaborate treatment in medieval literature. Our forefathers, with their unquestioning faith, could not even distinguish the supernatural from the natural. In fact the supernatural appeared to them the most natural thing in the world. The mental world of these "thought-children," as Miss Katherine Bates so aptly calls our medieval ancestors, was simply peopled by angels and saints and demons in company with ghosts, fairies, dwarfs and hobgoblins.

The Renaissance dealt a deadly blow to Christian supernaturalism. The growing enthusiasm for antiquity during that period, brought medieval literature with its supernatural element into disfavor with the world of learning. The men, to whom the poetry of the Greeks and Romans was all of a sudden revealed, could no longer find any joy in the phantasmagoria of medieval literature. They saw nothing but grossness and barbarism in it. The marvelous element of Christianity could no longer hold its ground against the mythology

of the classical poets. Boileau, who dictated the creed of the classical school, let his ban fall mercilessly on Christian supernaturalism. It is interesting to note that this lawmaker of the classical school forbade the use of the Christian supernatural in literature on religious grounds. His prescription of the "*merveilleux chrétien*" was apparently the result of his Jansenist proclivities. He provided a religious motive for the aesthetic taste of the period. The poetic treatment of religious subjects, this theorist of the classical school maintained, gives an air of fiction to the truth of Christianity. He recommended instead the employment of classical mythology in epic poetry. What is most peculiar is the fact that he enjoined, as if in supreme derision, the cult of pagan mythology in the name of Christian faith!

The classical epoch of French literature, which extends from the middle of the sixteenth century to the beginning of the nineteenth century, thus disdainfully turned away from the supernatural. It was reserved for the romantic school to bring back the supernatural to arts and letters. Chateaubriand maintained the superiority of the *merveilleux chrétien* over the *merveilleux paën* for poetical purposes. Mme. de Staël, his contemporary, similarly challenged Boileau's opinion. "There is no truth in Boileau's dictum," said she, "that the dramatizing of religious subjects gives an air of fiction to the truths of Christianity." This reversion in favor of the Christian supernatural at the beginning of the last century was closely bound up with the revival of religion, which has not failed to come as the predestined swing of the pendulum. Moreover, the sort of literature that would give the reader "the creeps" could not but have an appeal to men and women whose emotions had been keyed to a violent pitch by the murders of the Revolution and the military slaughters of the Empire.

But Chateaubriand was not the first to rebel against the classical creed. Boileau did not have it all his own way, even in his own life-time. As far back as the seventeenth century the authority of this dictator of the French classical school was not left unchallenged. Many of the contemporary poets, with Desmarests at their head, believed, on the contrary, that an epic poem should "contain the theology of the nation for which it is written." Chapelain, the formulator of the theory of the *épopée pacifique*, advocated what he called "*poétiser à la chrétienne*." As a matter of fact, the marvelous machinery of many a poem of the pseudo-classical school was bor-

rowed from Christianity. The mysteries of our religion were used as poetic paraphernalia. Heaven and hell served as store-houses for epic bric-à-brac. The Lord with his angels on the one hand and the Devil with his "flaming ministers" on the other were employed as poetic props and pulleys.

Many of the pseudo-classical poems present a *mélange* of the *merveilleux chrétien* with the *merveilleux païen*. Jehovah jostled with Jupiter even in the writings of the poets who claimed the superiority of the Christian mysteries over the antiquated mythology of antiquity. Chateaubriand himself, like the pseudo-classical poets who preceded him, mingled without any discrimination in his "epic" romances classical mythology with the marvelous element of Christianity. The fact of the matter is that classical mythology entered bodily into the Christian marvelous through the metamorphosis by the Church of the gods of paganism into demons of hell. Already Godeau and Desmarteaux among pseudo-classical poets, following the lead of medieval writers, turned the gods of classical antiquity into demons by preserving their names and attributes. The controversy between the champions of classical mythology and the advocates of Christian mysteries boiled down to the question whether the gods of antiquity should be employed in poetry in their original character or in their metamorphosed condition.

Moreover, Chateaubriand, in his conception of the supernatural, did not advance beyond the pseudo-classicists any more than in his application of it. He employed the *merveilleux chrétien* just as they had employed the *merveilleux païen*, merely as an artificial embellishment, as a rhetorical adornment, of epic poetry. But his own works proved that a figurative and fictive supernatural, whether it be pagan or Christian, had no poetic value whatever and was by no means necessary to the dignity of an epos. His strictures upon a mechanical application of the "classical marvelous" were turned against his own "Christian marvelous." It was evident from his own works that there was no intrinsic worth in mythological fictions, whether classic or Christian.

Chateaubriand's chief merit consisted in drawing the attention of his contemporaries to the poetic possibilities of Christianity. But the romantic school, to which he gave birth, went beyond its founder and employed the supernatural not as form but as *fond* of its poetry. The supernatural served the romanticists not as the ornament but as the subject-matter of poetry and aimed to call forth in

the reader that particular emotion which is its own, that "*frisson de l'au-delà*," as the French call it.

The appeal of the supernatural was not limited to the romantic period. The last century, critical and analytical though it was, was wholly under the spell of the supernatural. Supernaturalism exerted its sway over the naturalists no less than over the romanticists. No better proof of the appeal of the supernatural can be adduced than the fact that even Maupassant, in whom we find the purest expression of naturalism, fell under its charm.

The reason that the realists showed a tendency toward the supernatural is that the products of the imagination and belief are as profoundly real as the illusions of the senses which we call facts. The extra-sensual world appears real to us in consequence of the fact that we experience it in our dreams. Says Edgar Saltus:

"Back of the doors that close behind our birth crouch shapes beautiful or diabolic, shapes fashioned perhaps in our anterior lives. In the land of dreams they greet us."

Man has always shown a clear and constant inclination toward the creations of fancy and belief. The supernatural has a charm even for the sceptic. Prosper Mérimée, seeking to account for the hold which the supernatural had on him notwithstanding his professed unbelief in any higher powers, has said:

"The greatest sceptic has his moments of superstitious belief, and under whatever form it may present itself, the marvelous finds a chord which thrills in the human heart."

In this respect we shall never outgrow our childhood but always hark back to the stories we heard in the nursery.